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Banished by Bolivia, Circus Animals Find a Home on Colorado Range

Pat Craig Can't Say No to a Carnivore; Lions and Tigers and Bears! Oh, My!

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By NEIL KING JR.

Updated Feb. 16, 2011 12:01 a.m. ET

KEENESBURG, Colo.—When Bolivian President Evo Morales signed a law last year banning live animals from traveling circuses, it posed a problem. What to do with the liberated lions?

It didn't take long to find a fix: 50-year-old former high-school math teacher Pat Craig.

Mr. Craig shares his three-bedroom house here on the plains of eastern Colorado with 13 dogs, five cats and three parrots.

He has other creatures in his backyard: three packs of wolves, 66 black bears, 13 grizzly bears, two prides of lions, 70 tigers, 14 mountain lions, five leopards, eight bobcats, five coati mundi, five lynx, three foxes and a coyote—all scattered

Pat Craig started providing sanctuary to unwanted animals when he was just out of high school. Now he runs the largest rescue organization in the country for

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large carnivores. WSJ.'s Neil King reports from Keenesburg, Colorado.

Mr. Craig just can't say no to needy carnivores. So when he got the call in early December asking whether he could put up 25 lions being airlifted from Bolivia, he didn't hesitate.

"It wasn't a hard decision," Mr. Craig says. "I've got the room. This is what I do."

With the lions set to arrive Wednesday on a chartered cargo jet, Mr. Craig has been working flat out to prepare a proper home for them. It has been cold lately here—around zero some days, with a brisk wind ripping in off the plains. It is very warm in Bolivia.

Colorado's Big Cat Keeper



Pat Craig and one of his Asian tigers. Otto Schulze for The Wall Street Journal

"I'm pretty sure they will like it here," Mr. Craig says, standing in the middle of a heated, 42-foot-high, 15,000-square-foot vinyl shelter, complete with new sod and freshly planted trees.

Outside, you can hear the distant yap and howl of the wolves. Inside, you hear the whoosh of the huge propane heater.

Mr. Craig and his son Casey assembled the enclosure in just a few weeks, with the help of hired hands. They are beginning now to fence off the surrounding 80 acres

so the lions can roam outdoors once the weather turns.

"I went over to their house once and three baby tigers were devouring chicken legs in the living room. It was interesting," says Rita McClay, a neighbor who says she's now used to being awakened by wolves. She isn't bothered by the nearby lions and such because she trusts the fences to keep them at bay.

The son of a phone operator and a gas-station owner, Mr. Craig grew up on a farm outside Boulder, 45 miles to the west. His passion for castoff carnivores started just after high school, when a friend gave him a tour behind the scenes at a small zoo, and he saw the unwanted animals held in small cages, many destined to be put to death.

across 320 acres of rolling prairie.

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He got state approval to keep large carnivores on the farm, and started with a black leopard named Freckles, a zoo castoff from North Carolina. Next came a mountain lion from a Utah amusement park. Then a pet black bear from California.



He got his first big batch of cats when he was 20, after police seized eight lions, three leopards and a jaguar from a Colorado doctor who was raising them for their pelts.

"I guess you could say, after a while, I got a little carried away," Mr. Craig says.

Since then, he has moved twice, and has bought more and more acreage, as carnivores of all kinds continued to come his way from defunct carnival shows, Mexican fortune tellers, busted drug dealers, Hollywood studios and people who found it wasn't as much fun as they thought to raise bears in the basement.

A burly, mellow, bear of a man, Mr. Craig dreams about the day when people will stop trafficking in exotic animals, making what he does unnecessary. But that isn't about to happen.

When he bought his first swath of wheat fields outside Keenesburg in 1994, he had 60 animals on 80 acres. He quit his teaching job two years later, when tending to the animals got to be too much. His wife, with whom he had raised two sons and many baby lions, tigers and jaguars, moved out three years later.

After draining his savings and his small retirement account, selling his vintage motorcycle and tapping out his donors, he nearly shut down in 2006. By then he had 155 animals.

Better marketing and a slew of new donors kept Mr. Craig afloat, and even allowed him to expand. He now has 275 large carnivores on land four times the size of his original plot.

His Wild Animal Sanctuary, as he calls it, is the largest of its kind in the U.S., he says, with a food budget alone of nearly \$500,000 a year. In all, the not-for-profit relies on donations to support most of its nearly \$2 million-a-year budget. Visitors, who pay \$10 apiece, can view the animals from an elevated walkway.

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Mr. Craig has also amassed a thick sheaf of hospital records, which he keeps stashed in his office. He has been set upon by wolves, tackled by tigers and mauled by lions—and he holds no grudges.

Both of his knees are shot. One run-in with a jaguar nearly deprived him of his left arm. He has scars where a startled lion chomped his chest, puncturing a lung. "It happened in a split second," Mr. Craig says. "We were both apologetic afterward."

Mr. Craig is a legend among carnivore keepers for his fearlessness and rapport with cats. He has crafted harmonious lion prides and wolf packs with animals who had had no contact with their own kind.

"Some people think Pat's a little crazy, taking in all those animals and then moving among them like he does," says Rick Barongi, director of the Houston Zoo. "There's no one like him, for sure."

Animal Defenders International, a U.K. group that pushed to impose the Bolivian ban and is paying for the lions' flight and future upkeep, is championing similar circus laws in many other countries.

All of which could bring still more carnivores to Keenesburg. Now nearly out of land, Mr. Craig is eyeing the surrounding fields. He sees 1,000 acres, stretching to the horizon, with more lions, more tigers, more bears.

Write to Neil King Jr. at neil.king@wsj.com

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kory gough

I believe this is a good first step in making people aware of the problems that come with keeping these animals in captivity. They should be in protected areas where

they can live freely. I respect what these guys are doing to take care of the ones that have no other place to go.

Feb 20, 2011

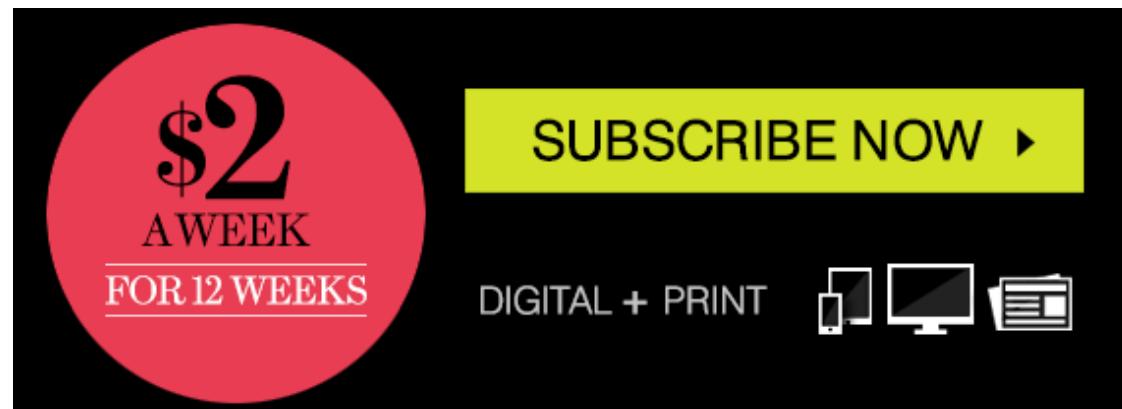


Stephanie Szmyd

As someone involved in Equine Rescue, I applaud those capable of handling the truly difficult job of caring for those unfortunate animals. I'm sure Mr. Craig has had his share of rescuing animals in a "rescue" as happens in the horse world.

Irresponsible breeding causes our Equine problem, and the Exotic Animal Trade causes Mr. Craig's. I'm no longer certain if "Humane" is the proper adjective we should be using for compassionate actions. Maybe we should create a new word based on Canis Lupus - current thinking in Anthropology now suggests early primates learned the behaviors we associate with being human from wolf packs. Just a thought.

Feb 16, 2011



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